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(54) Electrostatic discharge protection circuits for mixed voltage interface and multi-rail disconnected power grid applications

(57) On-chip ESD protection for semiconductor chips with mixed-voltage interface applications and internal multiple power bus architecture are described. ESD robustness in shallow trench isolation 0.50- and 0.25-micron channel-length CMOS technologies is presented in the form of ESD structures and circuits including hybrid three-rail and mixed voltage interface embodiments.

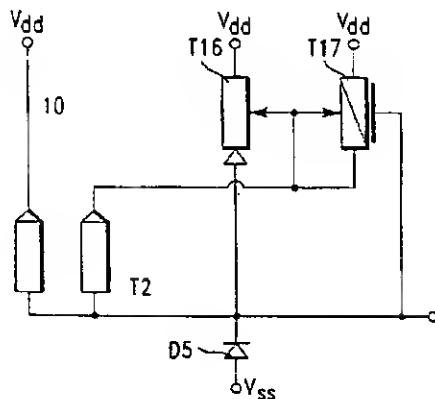


FIG. 5

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Description

Field of the Invention

This invention relates to semiconductor devices and more particularly to circuits designed to protect such devices from damage due to undesirable voltage conditions which can cause catastrophic damage to circuit elements, commonly referred to as electrostatic discharge (ESD) protection and overvoltage protection circuits and more particularly to on-chip ESD protection for semiconductor chips with mixed voltage interface applications and internal multiple power bus architecture.

Description of the Prior Art

The shrinking of MOSFET dimensions used in advanced integrated circuit technology for constructing a high circuit density and achieving performance objectives has required reduced power-supply voltages. With increased interest in portability, reduced power consumption in CMOS circuits is an important issue. Because power consumption is a function of CV^2f , the focus has been on reducing both capacitance, C, and power supply voltage, V, as the transition frequency increases. As a result, dielectric thickness continues to be scaled with the power-supply voltage. Power-supply reduction continues to be the trend for future low-voltage CMOS device scaling in advanced semiconductors.

The effect of MOSFET scaling on ESD protection has manifested itself in three ways: the shrinking of ESD structures and I/O circuitry, mixed-voltage interface environments, and noise isolation vs. ESD tradeoffs. On the first issue, reducing the area for both ESD structures and I/O circuitry makes structures more vulnerable; on the second, dual-voltage chips and mixing chip types forces new ESD structures to satisfy I/O needs; on the third issue, lower power-supply voltages are driving new bus architectures to isolate peripheral noise from internal core logic introducing new ESD concerns.

MIXED VOLTAGE INTERFACE (MVI) ENVIRONMENTS

Today's computer architecture requires the interfacing of semiconductor chip or sub-systems with different internal power-supply voltages. The semiconductor-chip power-supply voltages are different because of the technology generation mix, technology types, and applications. Dynamic random access memory (DRAM) chips, whose geometrical dimensions are typically the most aggressive, must communicate with other logic and microprocessor chips. Microprocessors must communicate with co-processors, analog circuits, printers and other input/output (I/O) circuits. With the mix of power-supply voltages, chip-to-chip interface I/O circuitry must be designed to avoid electrical overstress and prevent undesirable current leakage paths that create system-level

power loss. If the I/O circuit area remains a small percentage of total die size, the I/O circuits may operate at the intrinsic detect-free limit of the dielectrics. As a result, dielectric thicknesses continue to be scaled with MOSFET scaling, even in dual-voltage chips.

ESD circuits must also satisfy the same interface I/O conditions and constraints. A system-level constraint placed on ESD and circuit designers is that both the ESD device and external circuits are designed to prevent voltage overstress or forward-biasing in MVI environments when both chips are powered up. For example, in 3.3/5.0 V MVI, double-diode ESD networks cannot be used; but, a diode string is acceptable. In power-up, the 3.3 V supply must be raised prior to the 5 V supply, creating a power-up sequencing constraint.

An additional system-level constraint on ESD protection and I/O networks is the desired feature that subsystems not draw current from the primary powered-up system when the subsystem is either in a power-up mode or shut off. This concept can be generalized as satisfying the power boundary condition that no power be drawn from the main system when peripheral subsystems are turned off. ESD protection circuits and I/O networks that satisfy these conditions are power-up sequence-independent MVI networks.

POWER-UP SEQUENCE-DEPENDENT CMOS DRIVER CIRCUITS

FIG. 1 shows a standard CMOS off-chip driver (OCD) circuit including double-diode ESD devices. Such circuits have been used to provide ESD protection for data output pad 10 which is driven by MOSFETs T1 and T2. This driver cannot be used for MVI environments because the p-channel MOSFET will be forward-biased when the pad voltage exceeds the power-supply voltage; if the power supply is shut off, forward-biasing will also occur and draw current from external sources that are attached to its input pad. For this class of OCD designs, double-diode networks, resistor/NFET pi-networks and other ESD devices can be used without restriction.

For MVI environments, CMOS OCD circuits use series p- and n-channel MOSFETs as shown in FIG. 2. The use of two series connected p-channel MOSFETs T3 and T4 avoid forward-biasing when voltage on chip pad 10 is raised above the power supply. Using two n-channel MOSFETs T3 and T4 in series avoids hot-electron degradation caused by electrical over-stress. From an ESD perspective, the p-channel MOSFETs form two series diodes to the Vdd power rail. ESD robustness of the OCD is limited by the diode series resistance. The series resistance of the five diode protection circuit D3 is dominated by the n-well sheet resistance. For positive-mode ESD protection, series n-channel MOSFETs are also advantageous for delaying secondary thermal breakdown. But, for negative modes with separate ground power busses, it is a severe disadvantage because there is no current path to the NFET source. The OCD circuit is not

power-up sequence-independent because p-channel MOSFETs forward-bias when external sources are well above the power supply. For these MOSFET OCD drivers, diode string ESD networks can be used. Power-up sequence-dependent MVI ESD networks are any design that, by grounding the power supply, leads to continuous dc current flow out of the powered-up part of the network.

Double-diode networks are power-up sequence-dependent networks that cannot be used for mixed-voltage interfaces; diode strings are power-up sequence dependent networks that can be used for MVI environments.

POWER-UP SEQUENCE DEPENDENT NON-MVI ESD NETWORKS

To achieve ESD robustness in MVI diode-string circuits, power-up sequence-dependent double-diode ESD circuits must be understood. ESD double-diode protection networks have been designed in 0.5- and 0.25-micron channel length CMOS technologies. An analytical model was developed explaining the ESD failure results. The analytical model and the experimental results are consistent with the Wunsch-Bell model in the adiabatic regime. From this benchmark structure, two important points are evident. First, the n-well design and sheet resistance are key to achieve ESD robustness. Second, ESD robustness is degraded due to junction scaling. P+ junction scaling and lower semiconductor thermal budgets decrease the distance between the p-n metallurgical junction and titanium salicide. These effects and other scaling issues also reduce ESD robustness with technology scaling. Additionally, as MOSFET transistors are scaled from 0.5- to 0.25-micron channel length, n-channel snapback breakdown and sustaining voltages decrease. Therefore, as one scales to future technologies, the series resistance of diodes must decrease.

Using optimized ESD structures, ESD robustness above 4 kV was achieved in a 0.5 micron CMOS Shallow Trench Isolation technology. A 110 X 40 micron non-MVI double-diode ESD network achieved an ESD robustness of greater 4.7 kV in a 3.3-V 16-Mb DRAM.

In an advanced 0.5-micron logic technology, ESD robustness of more than 6.4 kV was achieved in an SRAM chip. ESD results over 10 kV are obtainable with the Vdd power rail grounded and a positive Human Body Model (HBM) ESD impulse. ESD robustness greater than -10 kV is achieved using an n-well diode. The diode series resistance is less than 7 ohms.

POWER-UP SEQUENCE-DEPENDENT MVI ESD NETWORKS

For MVI environments, a five-diode-string ESD network can achieve ESD robustness in 3.0/5.0 V environments. Since ESD protection is dependent on the total series resistance to the Vdd power supply, the resistance of each diode must equal R_{well}/N (where R_{well} is the

diode series resistance and N is the number of stages). For example, if a diode series resistance of 5 ohms is adequate for a double-diode circuit, approximately 1 ohm per stage is required for a five-diode-string 3.3/5.0-V tolerant MVI ESD network. Since each stage of the string must be N times larger, the area of the N-diode-string ESD structure will be N^2 bigger than a single diode structure. This area impact can be reduced by decreasing p+ to n+ spacing and design optimization. Using a

five-diode-string MVI ESD device, 4X larger ESD robustness of 6.3 to 10 kV was achieved relative to Vdd. This was demonstrated on an advanced microprocessor test chip.

Other solutions can also reduce the area impact of

MVI ESD structures. The diode string can be made common to different input after the first diode; given that I/O drivers are placed away from I/O pads. With a 3-V and 5-V system, a 5-V pin can be brought into an I/O cell and a single diode can be attached to the 5-V pin.

POWER-UP SEQUENCE-INDEPENDENT CMOS DRIVER CIRCUITS

With increased interest in dynamically reconfigured

systems and portability, the ability to shut off systems without dc power loss has become an important issue. Achieving maximum flexibility of operation modes and the ability to interface with different logic families (CMOS/TTL and ECL) are important for advanced microprocessors and logic libraries. For applications that desire power-up sequence independence or turning off sub-systems power supply, two strategies were recently developed for CMOS driver circuits: (1) p-channel MOSFETs are connected to a higher power-supply voltage

and (2) active circuits are used to sense the input state to prevent forward-biased structures. U.S. Patent 4,782,250 to Adams et al. teaches the use of an n-well control bias network, where the n-well of the p-channel MOSFET is biased by control circuitry connected to the

input node. This circuit was further extended by Austin, Piro and Stout in their U.S. Patent 5,151,619. The floating or self-bias well driver concept was extended by Döbberpuhl et al. ("200 Mhz 64-Bit Dual Issue Microprocessor," ISSCC Technical Papers, pp106-7, 1992), to allow the driver to interface with ECL and avoid p-channel MOSFET stacked pull-up transistors in the driver stage as shown in FIG. 3. In this circuit, MOSFETs T7 and T8 represent the push-pull driver pair, Device T9 acts as a control between the output terminal 10 and the gate of

T7. PMOSFET T10 acts as an N-well bias transistor. The concept has also been used for fault-tolerant systems in high-reliability spacecraft systems, where powered-down redundant circuit boards cannot act as a power loss. In floating-well circuits, when the data-output node rises above the power supply, all p-channel MOSFET implants connected to the data-output node begin to forward-bias. The n-well bias control p-MOSFET gate bias turns off the p-channel MOSFET, allowing the n-well

node to float. As the p-channel MOSFETs forward-bias, the n-well rises to the data-output-node voltage minus 0.7 V. The circuit in FIG. 3 uses three additional p-channel MOSFETs T13, T14 and T15 to force the n-well voltage to Vdd-power supply voltage.

POWER-UP SEQUENCE-INDEPENDENT MVI ESD NETWORKS

ESD protection circuits connected to power-up sequence-independent CMOS driver circuits must also satisfy I/O requirements. N-well-to-n-well punchthrough devices, dual-rail pnnp silicon-controlled rectifiers (SCR), and low-voltage trigger SCRs (LVTSCR) all satisfy the power-up sequence-independent conditions. Several standard ESD networks were constructed in the 0.5- and 0.25-micron channel-length shallow trench isolation CMOS technologies. Negative-mode protection concepts, used in double-diode networks, were synthesized into the SCR networks for achieving good negative-mode HBM results.

The ESD HBM results showed that, for the 0.5-micron STI defined CMOS technology with retrograde wells, the n-well-to-n-well punchthrough ESD network robustness was typically 500 to 1500 V. ESD robustness was not achieved for any dimension allowed by device ground rules. The designs varied n-well-to-n-well space from 2.6 to 3.0 micron.

SCR structures have been shown to be effective for ESD protection. Good results can be obtained in latchup sensitive technologies. Twenty to 30 synthesized and hybridized SCR networks were built in four designs using low- and high-voltage triggering techniques, see Duvvuri et al., "A Synthesis of ESD Input Protection Schemes," EOS/ESD Symposium Proceedings, pp. 88-97, 1983. As a result, the current gain product is less than unity. Design A was a dual-rail SCR using a npn defined by two n-wells separated by shallow trench isolation. The p+ diffusion is connected to the n-well at the ends, using the n-well as an integrated resistor element. Design B added a lateral well-to-well npn and n-well diode for the negative-mode protection to the dual-rail SCR. Both designs demonstrated poor positive-mode protection due to high n-well breakdown voltages and poor pnnp bipolar gain. The second design demonstrated better negative mode protection. Design C was a low-voltage n-channel MOSFET-triggered dual-rail SCR based from the thick oxide design. Design D was a low-voltage n-channel MOSFET-triggered dual-rail SCR with a lateral npn and n-well diode. Even with n-channel snapback triggering the SCR, low ESD robustness is achieved. Because of a 3 X 10¹³/cm² retrograde well dose and shallow trench isolation, the vertical pp bipolar dc gain is typically 2 and the lateral dc npn gain is negligible. Using conventional triggering techniques (no external control circuitry), ESD protection with an SCR structure could not achieve 2 kV ESD protection to all HBM test modes in this advanced CMOS technology.

ESD protection circuits that use thick-oxide MOSFET structures are ineffective with shallow trench isolation. Attempts to implement n-channel MOSFET/resistor pin networks, SCRs, or punchthrough devices in test chips or products have demonstrated very poor ESD protection results, fabricator-to-fabricator variations or process-control issues with CMOS driver circuits. When these concepts were used to protect floating-well driver circuits, ESD robustness was better without the ESD protection circuit! These early results indicated that the floating well driver has inherent ESD robustness which could be advantageous.

ESD DESIGN COMPARISONS

There are design tradeoff considerations for each ESD design choice. The tradeoffs are electrical parameters, area, ESD robustness, and extendability to future technologies. Well-to-well punchthrough devices do not require significant area but have poor ESD robustness. The breakdown and punchthrough voltages are too high to protect future thin dielectrics; and, because the n-well is attached to the I/O pad, the design capacitance is larger than diode-based ESD concepts. SCR pnnp ESD protection circuits can be built in a small design area. In a traditional SCR design, the well is attached to the input node, which increases the input-node capacitance. In dual-rail LVTSCRs, MOSFET gate capacitance also increases the ESD design capacitance. Diode-string designs require significant area but achieve good ESD robustness. In technologies with high n-well sheet resistance, diode strings have reverse amplification concerns. With retrograde n-well implants, vertical npn bipolar gain effects can be eliminated and low series resistance is achievable. Diode strings can not be power-up sequence-independent.

Floating-well ESD protect circuits have many positive merits. The capacitance is dependent only on the p-channel MOSFET n-well control circuit gate, the p+ diode and an n-well diode. The area required for a self-bias-well ESD is much smaller than the diode-string ESD device. From an area vs. ESD robustness tradeoff, the self-bias-well concept will be favored over other design concepts in power-up sequence-dependent and independent I/O environments.

NOISE, ESD AND DISCONNECTED POWER GRIDS

Tradeoffs between on-chip noise and ESD protection are becoming a significant issue in I/O design for 0.50- and 0.25-micron channel-length CMOS technologies due to power-supply scaling with technology generations. As power-supply voltages decrease, circuits become more sensitive to on-chip noise. With the higher level of integration and larger semiconductor chips, more off-chip drivers are present on advanced microprocessors and memory chips.

As the number of I/O drivers increase and pow-

emitter-base voltage of the p+ diode. As a result, the gate of the p-channel n-well bias circuit is not electrically overstressed. DC current will not flow because the p-channel MOSFET gate voltage is well above the p-channel MOSFET threshold voltage.

When Vdd is used as reference ground, the p-channel MOSFET n-well control circuit allows the n-well to float. For the positive HBM impulse, the p+ diode will forward-bias. Holes are injected into the n-well region and diffuse to the p+ diode attached to the grounded Vdd power supply. The retrograde well establishes a potential gradient, deflecting the hole transport vertically to the collector structures. The p+ diode attached to the Vdd power rail capacitively couples to the well, allowing a slower rise to the well structure. When the chip substrate is grounded, the well capacitively couples to the substrate allowing the diode to forward-bias. For negative HBM test mode with respect to Vdd, a lateral npn exists between the n-well diode and the Vdd guard ring and the virtual-well tub. For negative HBM test mode with respect to Vss, the n-well diode forward-biases to chip substrate. The first embodiment was constructed using a 60 X 3-micron p+ diode in a 120 X 40-micron area. ESD protection of 2.4 kV and -7 kV was achieved in the positive and negative modes, respectively. An experimental structure was constructed with a thin oxide p-channel MOSFET formed between the p+ diode and the p-channel source of the n-well bias network with no significant improvement. These clear results of the prototype demonstrated that this concept is feasible as an ESD protection network. To improve the self-bias well ESD design, the ESD circuit was implemented into a logic family I/O library that uses power-up sequence-independent CMOS floating well drivers.

THREE-RAIL DISCONNECTED POWER GRID MVI ESD PROTECTION NETWORKS

ESD protection relative to the other power rails is achieved by establishing connectivity between the power rails with supply-to-supply ESD networks as shown in FIGs. 6 and 7. It is very dependent on the bus architecture and the physical distance between the pad and the grounded power rail pin. Conceptually, connectivity to all power rails can be achieved at the pad itself is preferred. To address ESD protection in multi-rail disconnected power grids, new ESD circuits were designed and implemented. The objective was to achieve ESD protection relative to all power rails local to the pin, which avoids rail-to-rail solutions that jeopardize functionality because of on-chip noise. Therefore, tertiary-rail designs were developed which function in six ESD impulse modes instead of four. In our case, ESD protection to Vcc, Vss, and Vss(OCD) power rails had to be provided for both positive and negative ESD impulses. To address the negative Vss(OCD) HBM lail mechanism, an ESD device needed to be developed that provides ESD protection relative to the Vss(OCD) power rail but does not

jeopardize the other ESD protection modes to Vdd and Vss. FIG. 8 shows another embodiment for a dual Vss design which attaches the outer n-well ring to the Vss (OCD) power rail. The ESD network performs as a standard double-diode network to the Vcc and Vss power rails. A lateral npn transistor T20 is formed between the pad and Vss(OCD) power rail for negative HBM impulses with the Vss(OCD) rail at ground. The n-well ring 12 acts as a guard ring for the n-well diode to prevent current flow to the n-channel MOSFET driver circuit. This solution does not require any additional space or capacitance than a standard double-diode design. A SCR pnnp SCR1 is formed between the pad node and Vss(OCD) rail for positive mode Vss(OCD) protection. The SCR is formed by the p+ diode, the n-well, the p+ substrate and the n-well which is tied to Vss(OCD). The structure of FIG. 8 is a hybrid double-diode and SCR pnnp network which uses diodes, transistors and SCRs in a common structure. ESD results over 5 kV were achieved. This design was modified to improve the Vss(OCD) ESD protection levels. A new structure was constructed that extended the n+ implant on the n-well diode and the n-well ring to improve the lateral turn-on of the lateral well-to-well npn. Additionally, for positive impulses, the n+ implant well contact of the n-well tub was extended to improve the SCR pnnp action. The ESD protection of the structure, relative to the Vss(OCD) rail, was +5.6 kV and -2.0 kV for positive and negative modes, respectively. These results were for a n+/n+ space of 1.35 micron. With an n+-to-n+ space of 1.8 micron, ESD robustness of 6.0 and -1.8 kV was observed with the Vss(OCD) rail grounded. Extension of an n+ implant on the n-well diode and n-well ring degrades ESD robustness 1 to 3 kV.

To solve the negative-mode Vss(OCD) lail mechanism, Structure A was implemented into a test chip. ESD protection was improved from -500 V to a range of -3.5 to -10 kV for negative HBM impulses on the OCD pins. The negative mode pin-to-OCD lail mechanism was also delayed to -7000 V. Since the SCR pnnp action is weak in shallow trench isolation designs with low n-well sheet resistances, there was no improvement in the positive HBM ESD mode. Additionally, the structure was implemented between the power rails, using the Vss(OCD) pin as an input; ESD protection between all the power rails improved from 2.4 kV worst-case to greater than 10 kV between all rails. This was achieved without back-to-back diode configurations between Vss and Vss (OCD) to allow for noise isolation.

An alternate ESD design, as shown in FIG. 9, was also created by adding a low-voltage n-channel MOSFET 14 trigger between the Vss(OCD) n-well and the Vcc n-well to form a low-voltage-triggered SCR (LVTSCR). The design allows early triggering of the SCR in a Vss (OCD) mode with a positive impulse. The ESD circuit of FIG. 9 has no area or capacitance impact to the pad node but does have the possibility of introducing noise coupling between the Vss(OCD) and Vcc rails. Using a 0.675-micron gate length, ESD robustness relative to the

V_{SS(OCD)} rail for positive mode protection was 5.4 kV.

Another concept for V_{SS(OCD)} negative protection is inserting a p+ diode into the n-well diode of the double-diode network, not shown, to provide a diode to the V_{SS(OCD)} rail. For this concept, ESD protection of -6.2, -7.6 and -5.8 kV was demonstrated to V_{SS(OCD)} using a 2-micron wide implant within a 4-micron-wide n-well diode. This solution is a viable option to the lateral npn well-to-well concept.

Another concept for V_{SS(OCD)} positive protection was to use a lateral shallow trench isolation pnp transistor rather than a SCR. This embodiment is shown in FIG. 10 and utilizes the lateral pnp concept implemented into the self-bias well MVI device. A p+ implant 16 was placed next to the p+ diode 18 of the double-diode network to form a lateral pnp T21 and connected to the V_{SS(OCD)} rail. A p+ diode was also placed in the n-well diode which is connected to the input pad as indicated above. ESD protection of +5.8 kV and -5.8 kV was achieved with respect to the V_{SS(OCD)} pin. In yet another embodiment, a low voltage trigger was placed between the n-well tub attached to V_{dd} and the n-well ring attached to V_{SS(OCD)}; there was no ESD robustness improvement compared to Structure C. This structure used a thin oxide p-channel MOSFET instead of the lateral STI-defined pnp; the p-channel source is attached to the input node, and the drain is attached to V_{SS(OCD)}. ESD robustness of only 3.6 kV was achieved.

As an alternate strategy, additional structures used 3-rail pnnp SCR concepts. Tertiary-rail SCR designs were attempted to provide ESD protection to V_{cc}, V_{ss} and V_{SS(OCD)}. ESD protection relative to the V_{SS(OCD)} rail was +1.2 and -1.4 kV for positive and negative HBM impulses for a typical design. ESD robustness could not be successfully achieved with traditional triggered SCR concepts in this multi-rail architecture in the STI-defined latchup hard CMOS technology.

Using the optimum solutions, FIG. 10, a 110 x 40-micron design that used the lateral pnp concept for V_{SS(OCD)} positive modes and the lateral well-well npn concept for negative V_{SS(OCD)} modes was implemented. ESD robustness for positive HBM impulses was demonstrated to over 8.0 kV with respect to V_{ss}, V_{cc} and V_{SS(OCD)} power rails. On off-chip driver pins, ESD protection was greater than 10 kV with respect to V_{SS(OCD)}, V_{ss} and V_{cc}. ESD robustness was greater than -8 kV for negative HBM ESD testing relative to V_{SS(OCD)} and -10 kV relative to V_{dd} and V_{ss}. Address pins, with the lateral pnp disabled, achieved ESD protection over 9 kV in positive HBM test modes. This was achieved with the V_{SS(OCD)} and V_{ss} rails disconnected in a 5-V chip, where the internal chip capacitance is isolated by a voltage regulator from the peripheral busses and a 5-V compatible CMOS OCD. Charge-device model testing (CDM) showed that CDM ESD robustness was greater than 1000 V.

ESD robustness can be achieved by using three-rail ESD designs in disconnected power-grid structures and

maintain noise isolation. This is illustrated in FIG. 11 and is achieved without bi-directional external supply-to-supply networks. This alternative strategy may be advantageous in chip designs with high bus resistances, isolated power grids, and mixed-voltage tolerant chips. These structures may be advantageous for charge device model interaction because having a current path local to the pin produces CDM ESD robustness.

A comparative study was done in 0.5- and 0.25-micron technologies of ESD protection circuits for single-

and dual-voltage tolerant chip design. ESD robustness has proven successful with diode-string and floating-well ESD structures in latchup hard shallow-trench isolation technology.

15 A diode-string ESD protection network was developed for 3.3-V power supply and 5.0 V tolerant I/O for mixed-voltage environments. By using an optimized CMOS shallow trench isolation technology with minimum ground rules, ESD robustness over 6 kV was achievable for power-up sequence dependent environments.

20 A floating-well ESD protection circuit was developed for ASIC applications, advanced microprocessors, cold sparing environments, and power-up sequence independence. When used in conjunction with a floating-well CMOS driver circuit, ESD robustness of 6 to 9 kV was achieved in an advanced CMOS 0.5-micron technology. ESD robustness was superior to traditional ESD network solutions (e.g., SCR, LVTSCR, pi-network). The self-biased well ESD network has considerable value for low-power and low-voltage LOCOS and STI-defined CMOS technologies.

25 For advanced DRAM and logic technologies, power-grid connectivity was eliminated to increase noise margin to critical circuits. New ESD circuits have been developed to address new fail mechanisms in disconnected power grid environments. As power-supply voltages continue to decrease, tradeoffs of noise isolation versus ESD robustness will be a growing issue. Tertiary-rail ESD structures have shown effective in eliminating fail mechanisms, preserving noise isolation and achieving adequate ESD robustness over 8 kV. These concepts could be synthesized with the virtual well ESD circuits providing mixed voltage solutions in disconnected power grids.

30 Another conceptual direction is to provide ESD protection to all rails at the pin by developing protection circuits that have ESD protection to multiple power rails in a single-stage ESD structure. In the next sections, standard and novel ESD structures will be shown, highlighting the relationship of ESD devices and power bussing.

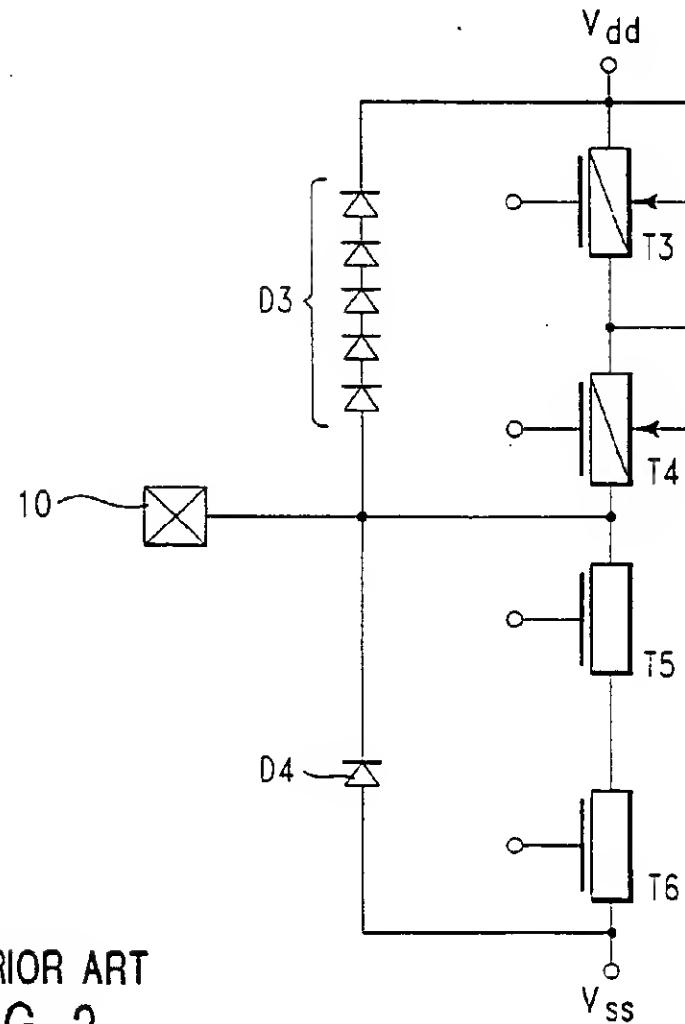
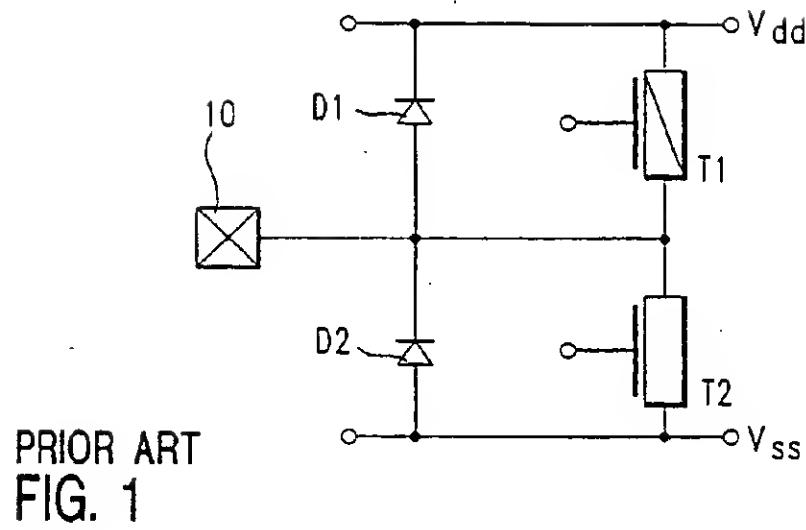
Claims

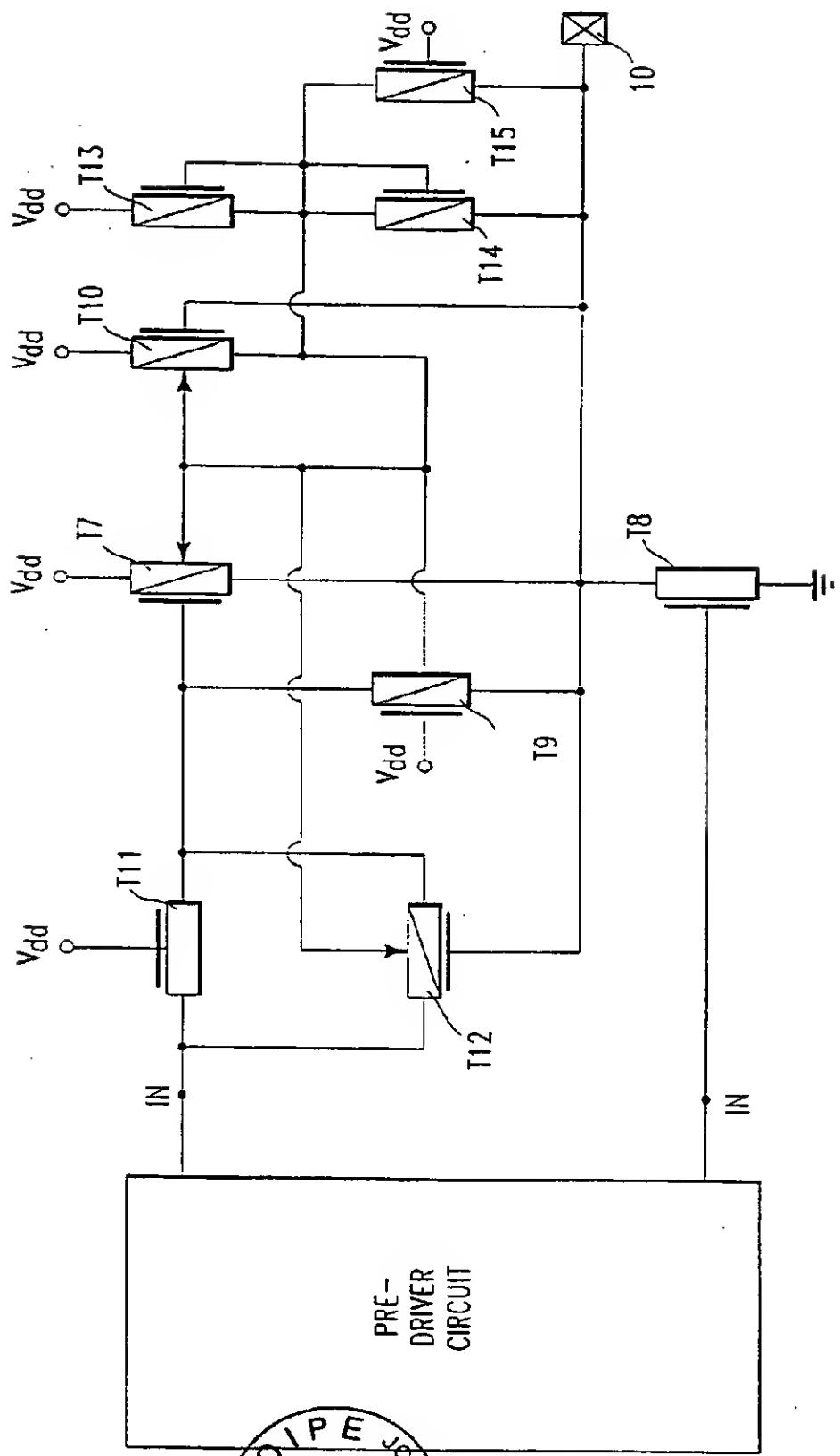
- 35
1. A semiconductor chip, comprising:
 - a first, a second, and a third power supply rail;
 - a pad; and

- an ESD protect circuit comprising a first, a second, and a third circuit unit, each said circuit unit connected to said pad and to a pair of said rails, said protect circuit providing ESD protection between said pad and each said rail.
2. A semiconductor chip as recited in claim 1, wherein said first power supply rail is connected to ground for off-chip drivers, said second power supply rail is connected to ground, and said third power supply rail is connected to Vdd.
 3. A semiconductor chip as recited in claim 1 or 2, wherein said circuit unit comprises a first diode in parallel with a pnp transistor and a second diode in parallel with an npn transistor.
 4. A semiconductor chip as recited in claim 1, 2 or 3 wherein said pad is connected to one of an input circuit and an output circuit.
 5. A semiconductor chip as recited in anyone of claim 1 to 4, wherein said ESD protect circuit provides ESD protection in a forward bias mode between said pad and each said rail for both positive and negative ESD pulses.
 6. A semiconductor chip as recited in anyone of claim 1 to 5, wherein each said circuit unit is connected to a different pair of said rails.
 7. A semiconductor chip as recited in anyone of claim 1 to 6, wherein:
 - said first circuit unit is connected to said first and second rails;
 - said second circuit unit is connected to said first and third rails; and
 - said third circuit unit is connected to said second and third rails; and wherein
 - each said circuit unit is providing ESD protection in a forward bias mode between each said rail for both positive and negative ESD pulses.
 8. A semiconductor chip as recited in anyone of claim 1 to 7, wherein each said unit further providing at least Vdd plus a diode forward voltage of noise isolation between said first rail and one of said second rail and said third rail when the chip is operational.
 9. A semiconductor chip as recited in anyone of claim 1 to 8, wherein said circuit unit further provides a diode breakdown voltage of noise isolation for one polarity when the chip is operational.
 10. A semiconductor chip as recited in anyone of claim 1 to 9 further comprising a substrate; and wherein said ESD protect circuit comprising a first well

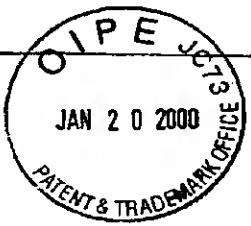
biased through an FET so that said ESD circuit is not forward biased during normal operation when the pad voltage rises above a rail voltage.

- 5 11. A semiconductor chip as recited in claim 10, wherein said FET has a gate connected to said pad, a source connected to VDD, and a drain connected to said first well, said structure further comprising:
 - a second well connected to said pad;
 - a third well connected to one of said first, second, and third rail;
- 10 12. A semiconductor chip as recited in claim 10 or 11, wherein said first, second, and third wells are first, second, and third n wells respectively and said FET is a PFET, said structure further comprising:
 - a lateral PNP having an emitter connected to said pad, a base connected to said first n well, and a collector connected to one of said first, said second, and said third rail;
 - an NPN transistor having an emitter connected to one of said first second and third rail, a base connected to said substrate, and a collector connected to said pad;
 - an NPN transistor having an emitter connected to said first n well, a base connected to said substrate, and a collector connected to said pad; and a diode connected between pad and substrate.
- 15 13. A semiconductor chip as recited in claim 10, 11 or 12, wherein said diode is the junction between said second n well and substrate.
- 20
- 25
- 30
- 35
- 40
- 45
- 50
- 55





PRIOR ART
FIG. 3



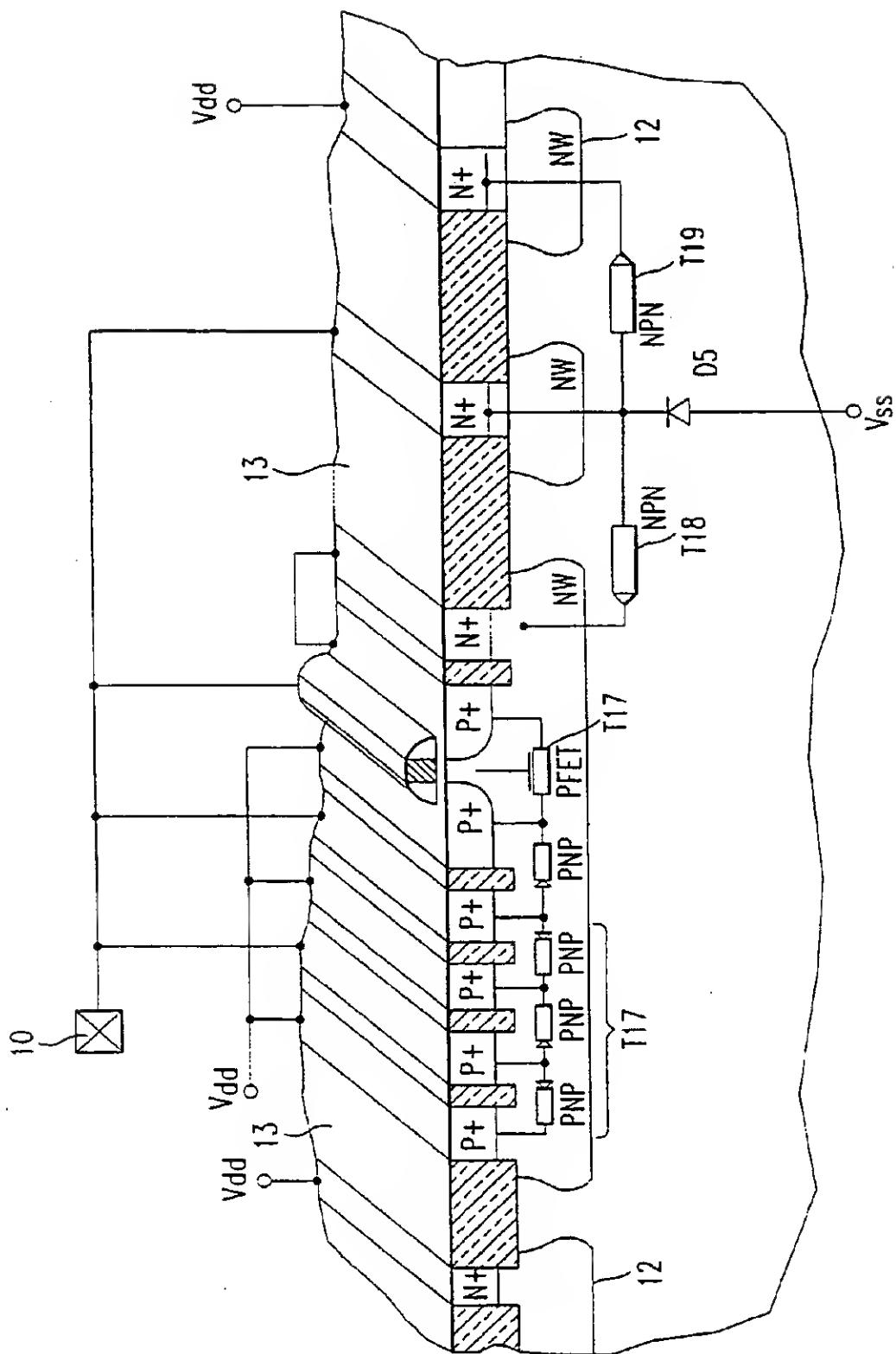


FIG. 4

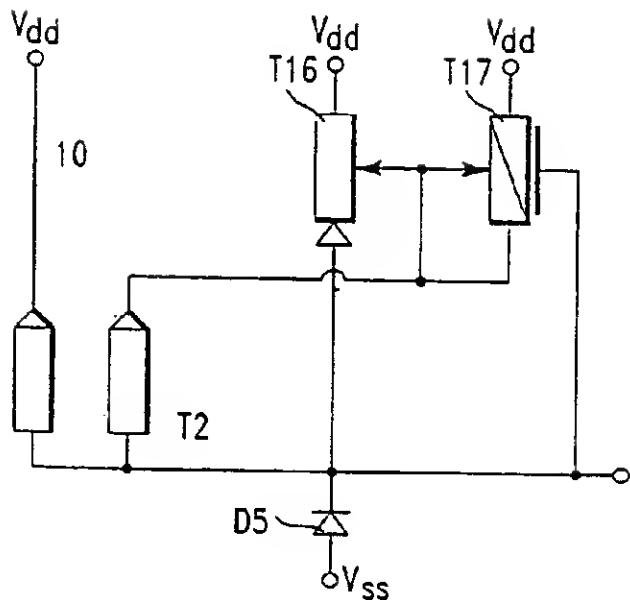


FIG. 5

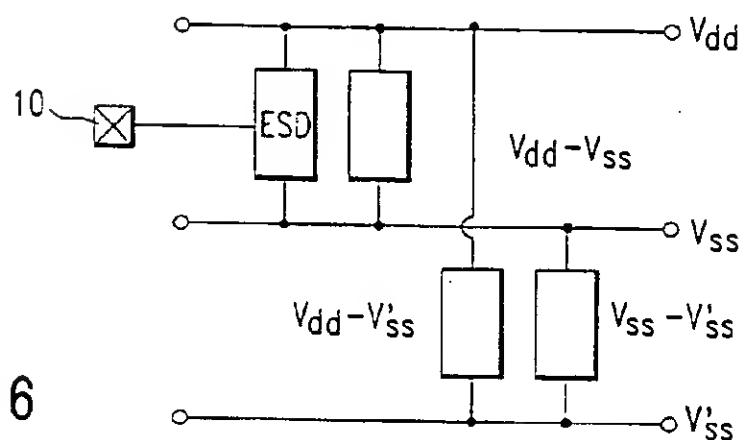


FIG. 6

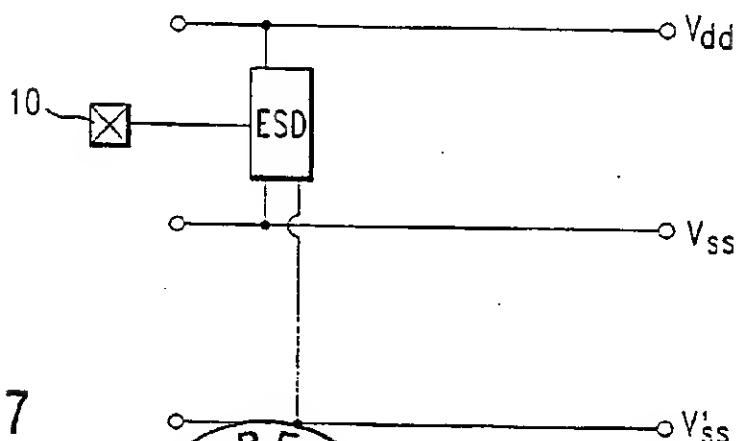


FIG. 7



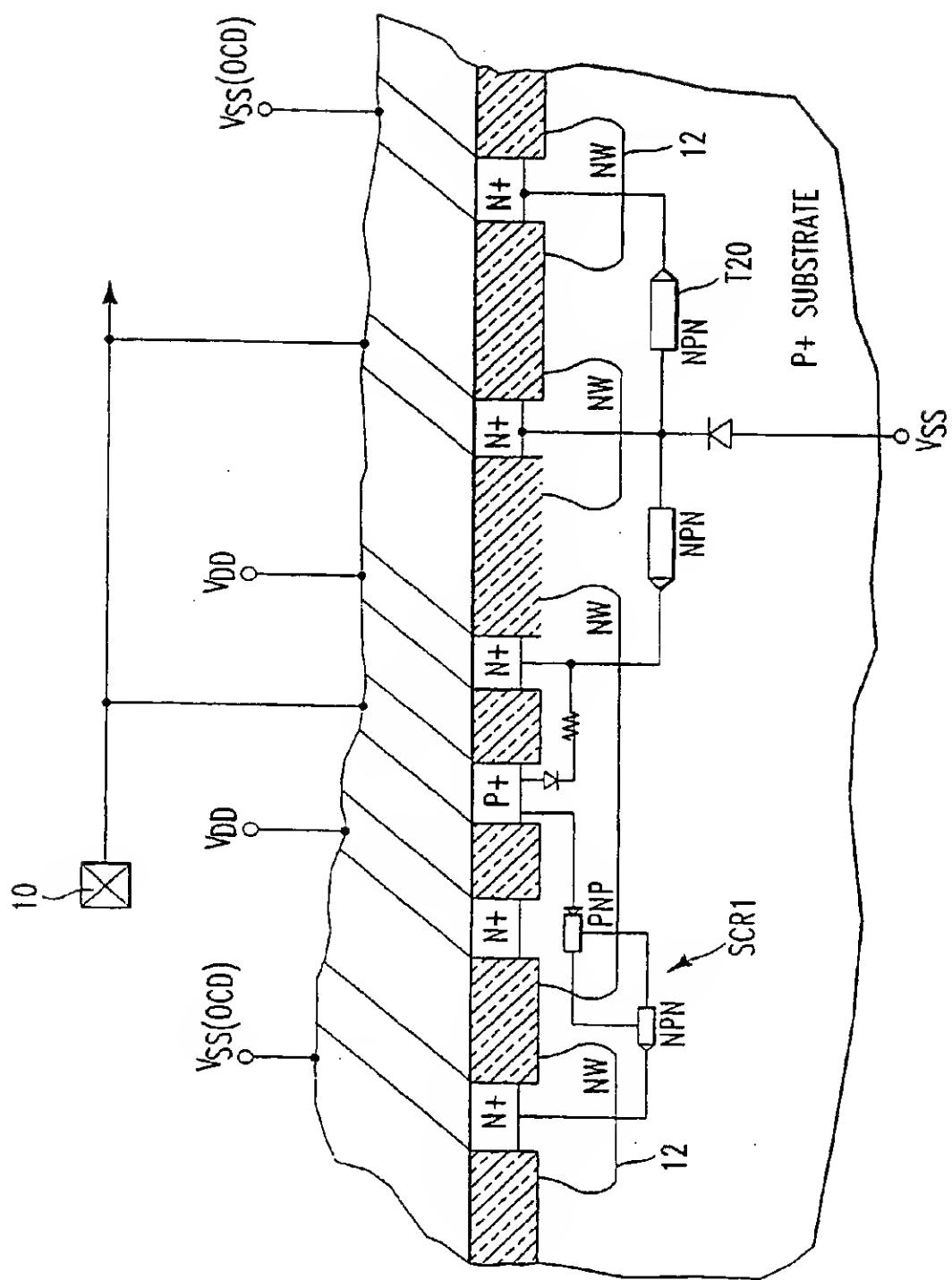


FIG. 8

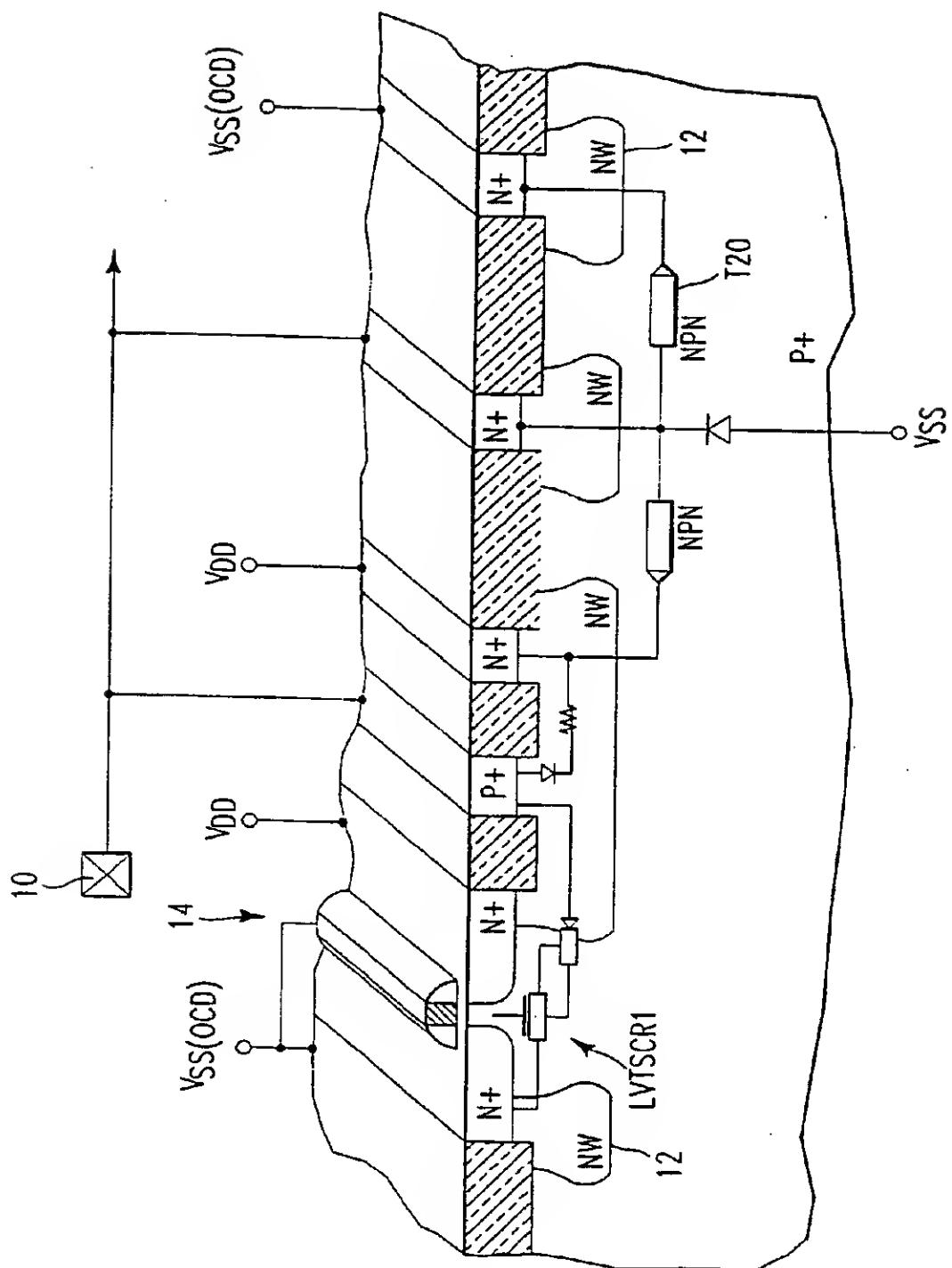


FIG. 9



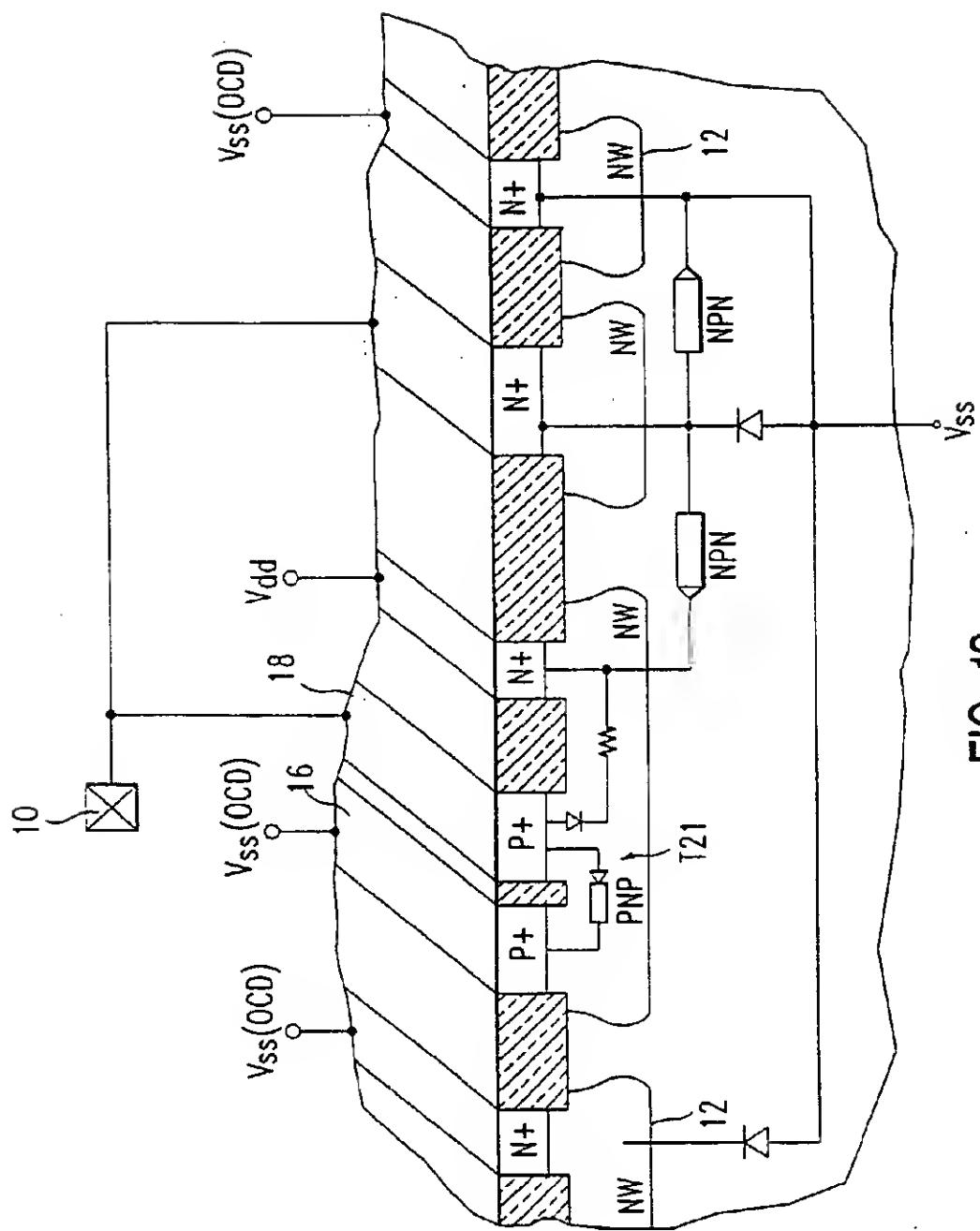


FIG. 10

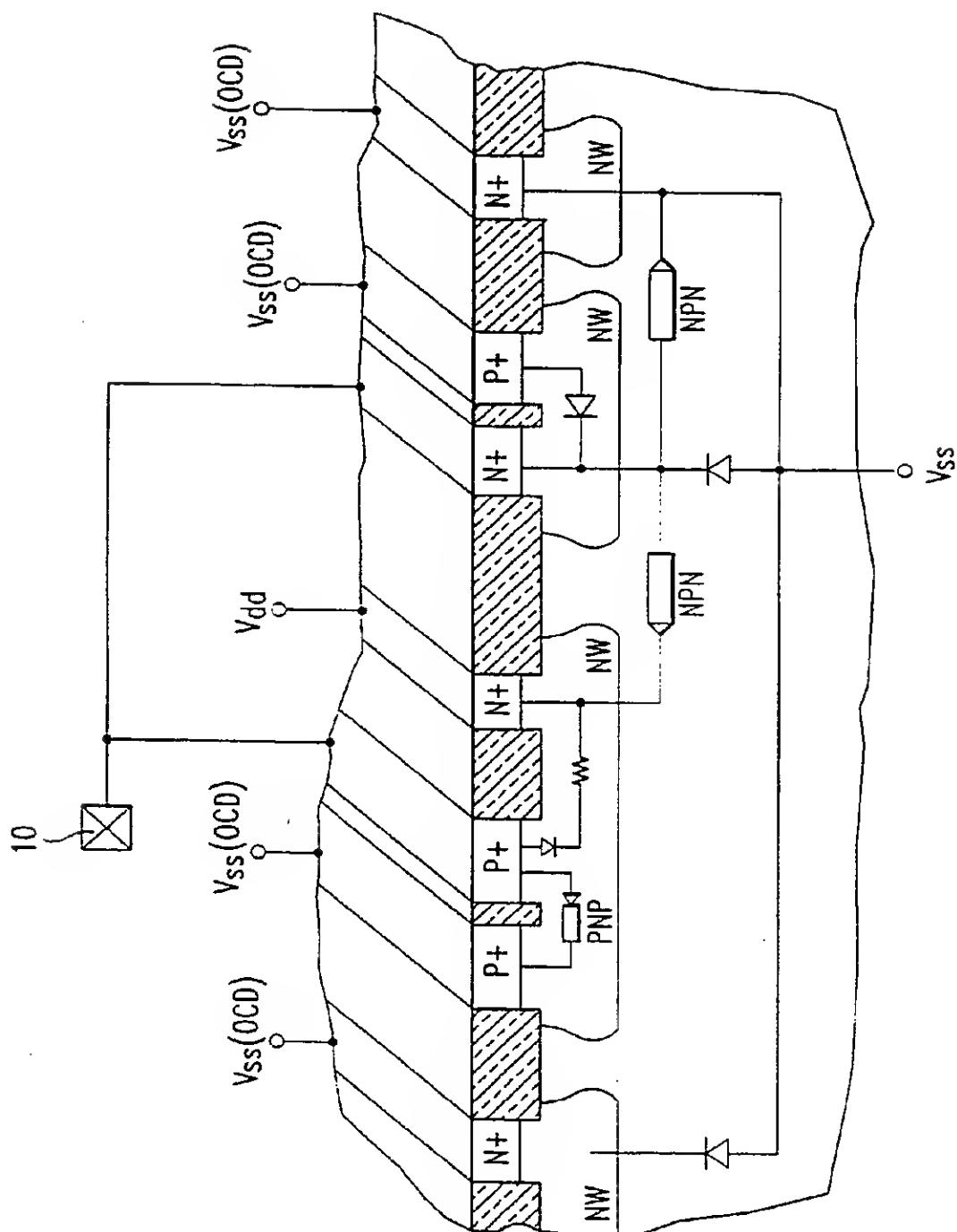


FIG. 11

